

The Potential For One-To-One Synchronous Writing Support In UK Higher Education: a report from the LondonMet writing centre

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Keywords: *Writing Centre, synchronous, online tutorials, writing support, writing mentor, free-writing*

Introduction

The London Metropolitan University Writing Centre is one initiative of the **Write Now** Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), a student-focused service founded in 2006.

Throughout, the Writing Centre's main focus is its "writing mentors" scheme, in which students are trained to work with their peers on all aspects of their writing: from understanding assignment questions to offering feedback on drafts. The scheme has been adapted for UK HE purposes (O'Neill, 2008), but retains the long-held principles of collaborative and non-directive writing instruction used in North American universities (Bruffee, 1984; North, 1984). Our aim is to facilitate more engaged learning and more confident student writers.

User feedback has been positive and the tutorials have grown in popularity yearly, with approximately 930 one-to-one, one-hour tutorials held in 2008/09.

Our experience is that many LondonMet students work during the day and cannot access our Writing Centre tutorials then. Therefore we wished to investigate the possibilities offered by online environments to see if we could open up our services to these students. Moreover, we were keen to see if the online environment might offer something pedagogically unique that would support the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, which seeks to develop a fully blended learning environment for its students.

This is an account of the Writing Centre's pilot online writing tutorials in 2008/09, which outlines the rationale for our initiative and the lessons learned.

Background

Online Writing Labs (OWLs) have been discussed in the US since the early 1990s, as writing centres grappled with information and technological revolutions (Harris & Pemberton, 1995; Ahrenhoerster & Brammer, 2002; Hewett, 2006).

More recently, some European writing centres have engaged with this issue (Opdenacker & Van Waes, 2007), from which three general theoretical and actual models of online writing support have emerged:

- OWLS (primarily resource repositories).
- Asynchronous feedback, usually as email feedback or discussion boards (Anderson, 2002; Coffin & Goodman, 2003).
- Synchronous support through internet “chat” or audio (e.g. Skype), sometimes accompanied by virtual reality software such as Second Life.

We were keen to pilot synchronous support. Earlier research into our Writing Mentor Scheme tutorials (Harrington *et al.*, 2007) had demonstrated the importance of rapport, collaboration and “*doing writing*” in the tutorials. Consequently, we re-designed our training programme to integrate these aspects (O’Neill *et al.*, 2009). Synchronous support appeared the most obvious online way of capturing the “rapport” and collaborative elements of successful face-to-face tutorials, which we felt would be missing from other forms of online support (Yergeau *et al.*, 2008).

Implementing the pilot

Initially, we used *Campfire*, a live text-chat tool, as our supporting technology for the pilot. This included eleven online tutorials. Students completed a brief feedback questionnaire after tutorials. It emerged that they liked the option to work online sometimes to avoid travel and sometimes because they liked working online; and, for one student, simply because he liked to try something new.

However, students and mentors alike struggled with the need to discuss and upload documents outside the ‘chat’ interface, making it hard to view documents and chat concurrently. It became clear that we needed a new tool for the next phase of the pilot.

We explored a number of other free web-conferencing tools, including *Adobe Connect*, which is expensive but was offered to us by a partner CETL at LondonMet (the Reusable Learning Objects CETL) for our project. *Adobe Connect* offered the promise of a more personalised user experience (favoured by our technologists and mentors). It has a professional appearance and flexible interface, enabling mentors to change functions, windows size and layout in real-time.

During Spring Semester 2009, we piloted the *Adobe Connect* tutorials with four mentors who attended training in online tutoring and using the new system. We ran sixteen tutorials during this pilot phase (including four online tutorials in which LondonMet mentors tutored students from Göttingen University, Germany).

Pilot evaluation

At the end of that Semester, we evaluated the pilot online tutorials from student feedback obtained by a specially-created questionnaire and examined the writing mentors' experiences of using the technology.

Students seemed generally pleased with the service, in particular its accessibility:

- *"It was easily accessible and it saved a lot of time as I did not have to travel all the way to uni for the same session."*
- *"...very efficient use of resources for the uni and convenient for students, someone in management must be on the ball!"*

All students who attended for a tutorial found it easy to use and a good use of their time.

Mentors were impressed by *Adobe Connect* - in particular, by the document annotation tools - and seemed enthusiastic to use and experiment with the technology.

Additionally, we examined the actual tutorial transcripts in order to assess if the learning experience for students had been worthwhile. We discovered that - at their best - online tutorials seemed to offer some of the best aspects of face-to-face tutorials. However, we also noticed several apparent limitations of online tutorials, which required addressing before rolling-out the tutorials that autumn.

Strengths of online tutorials

The informality of the online environment was clearly suitable for the rapport-building and the non-directive approach which is central to our face-to-face tutorials.

Below is an example of a mentor deferring expertise to the student, even though he has studied this material for his own degree:

- *P (mentor): what is it exactly that you want to work on today?*
- *R (student): I've been looking at a past exam essay on critical vs traditional social Psych*
- *R: like, how to structure it, what to say, etc?, the structure and if possible the areas to cover – I'm quite lost to be honest!*
- *P: perfect we are thinking alike*
- *R: ☺...*
- *P: remember I am a writing tutor and not a psych tutor – my knowledge of this stuff is pretty rusty (basically I don't remember it!). But let's start with how much you know...*
- *R: I went through the lecture slides-I'm even lost as I missed this lecture!"*

Other tutorials demonstrated that substantial content could be discussed online. The following extract from another tutorial illustrates that online synchronous chat can, when used well, promote an effective session in which content and structure are discussed collaboratively, at a level likely to lead to improved student writing:

- *“P (mentor): no problem: I’ve just realised something. Is one of the central links between homelessness and domestic violence the fact that women run away from the violence, therefore becoming homeless?”*
- *J (student): running away and not being housed by local authorities etc*
- *P: right – I only made that connection at the end of the 5th paragraph. Maybe you want to point it out a little sooner, therefore tying the first 5 paragraphs into one central idea*
- *J: the lecturer said something about making it link or something*
- *J: oh ok*
- *J: you mean summing up the first 5 paras into one para at the end?*
- *P: exactly – this is what he or she is talking about. Although it shows you have done a lot of research on the subject and seem to know it well, the first 4 paragraphs don’t really lead anywhere, and I believe explaining that THAT is the point you are making will make them all make sense*
- *J: great, would you suggest a paragraph summarising these points without a reference sort a thing?*
- *P: like, as a reader, when I read the last sentence of the 5th paragraph, I realised what point you had been trying to make with your first 4 paragraphs! Do you know what I mean? I think it will be beneficial to mention this link in one of the first couple of body paragraphs (not the intro).”*

Arguably, the issues discussed in the above session are, from a writing point of view, some of the most important and show that, despite - or perhaps because of - the informality of the learning environment online tutorials can, when used well, provide a valuable learning experience.

Limitations of online tutorials

Whilst our analysis gave us grounds to be satisfied that online tutorials could be effective learning environments for writing support, we did notice that a large number of tutorials focused on “lower-order” writing concerns (e.g. grammar and syntax) rather than the “higher-order”, more conceptual concerns (Hewett, 2006).

We also noticed that synchronous chat did not provide an opportunity for practical work, such as real-time student writing (or for students to read their work aloud), both of which our initial research had identified as valuable features of tutorials. For example, in one tutorial the mentor and student discussed the usefulness of free-writing at length but, unlike in a face-to-face tutorial, this was not followed by actual free-writing.

One final frustration was that synchronous chat did not provide the opportunity for students to read their work aloud which we find so valuable in face-to-face tutorials when working on language issues and which is very effective for showing students how to identify their own errors and edit more confidently. At the end of one tutorial, a mentor told the student: “The best thing you can do is read this out loud – then you would hear to add the ‘s’”. In a face-to-face tutorial, this could actually take place and its value demonstrated rather than simply described.

Conclusion

Our analysis made it clear we would need to add audio capacity to enable students to speak using voice technology as well as “text chat”. This would allow students to read aloud, provide a space for writing separate from the discussion about writing that was taking place, and also relieve some of the time pressures which seemed to result from the text-only environment.

We also decided to advocate greater use of the ‘notepad’ interface to allow students to write notes and perform actual writing during the tutorial.

One great benefit of *Adobe Connect* for us, over many other free webinar tools, is that all these features can be enabled or hidden depending on students’ technical experience and confidence. The flexibility of the interface and the mentor’s ability to adapt the student’s experience according to their technical ability and comfort is key to providing a bespoke learning experience, a core value of this Writing Centre.

Overall, then, we have revised our original expectation that online tutorials could bring about the best aspects of our face-to-face tutorials. Our learning, too, from the online tutorials themselves has made us less keen simply to replicate a face-to-face environment in cyberspace (cf. Kastman Breuch, 2005).

Moreover, we believe the online experiment will impact on our face-to-face practice, not least because the transcripts allow us to see more easily what is actually happening in tutorials.

Learning online is essential in the contemporary university and our experience leads us to endorse Jenkins (2006: 10) on the increasing fluidity between technology and more traditional media: “...convergence is coming, it is harder than it sounds and will require everyone to work together”.

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Biographical note:

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